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SUBJECT: MGLE01: SINIORA-MURR SPAT NEARLY SPLITS CABINET,
BUT -- MIRACULOUSLY -- ESCAPES MEDIA ATTENTION

Classified By: Jeffrey Feltman, Ambassador, per 1.4 (b) and (d).

SUMMARY

11. (C) Almost a week ago, away from the public eye, claims amounting to only 60,000 USD nearly wrecked the Siniora cabinet. Minister of Defense/Deputy PM Elias Murr backed a proposed compensation package for two retired generals exiled with Michel Aoun in Paris. PM Siniora, citing similar cases not on the agenda, rejected Murr's position. Knowing that the Christian ministers (fearful of Aoun's reaction if the measure were rejected) sided with Murr, Siniora also refused to bring the matter to a vote. Murr snapped. He accused Siniora of intentionally humiliating him. Crying that he lost his family and nearly his life for Lebanon, Murr said that he nevertheless remains suspect in Siniora's eyes, orphaned in the cabinet. Vowing to quit the cabinet and "tell all" to the press, Murr stormed out. Shuttle diplomacy by Marwan Hamadeh and Nayla Mouawad eventually brokered a reconciliation, and -- smiling for the cameras -- Murr and Siniora embarked on a high-profile stroll and cafe stop in downtown Beirut to dispel rumors of strife. Unexpectedly, President Emile Lahoud -- Murr's ex-father-in-law -- helped cool tempers, an uncharacteristic move which Murr chalked up not to charity but to Lahoud's fear of what Murr would say to the press. Ministerial contacts found Siniora unnecessarily stubborn and aggressive, yet they expressed bewilderment over Murr's emotional outburst ("as if he were stripping himself naked in front of us," as Mouawad said). The truly remarkable part of this tale is that it has remained largely out of the press, despite the voracious Lebanese appetite for political spats (especially one involving deeply personal issues). END SUMMARY.

CABINET "SPIN": LAST WEEK'S
SESSION WAS NORMAL, AMICABLE

12. (C) As reported in the Lebanese press, the 5/11 regular cabinet session turned into a marathon, lasting nearly seven hours and addressing some 40 agenda items. Although presided over by President Emile Lahoud, the press quoted (with almost palpable disappointment) ministers who said that the session, despite its length, was "normal" and that Lahoud and Siniora had (to the consternation of political gossips) treated each other with respect and in accordance with Lebanon's detailed constitution. But these professions of normalcy seem to be classic political spin. Six participants -- including Prime Minister Siniora and Deputy Prime Minister/Minister of Defense Murr -- described a stormy and emotional session that had the potential to wreck the cabinet.

ALL ABOUT A \$60,000 CLAIM

13. (C) About two-thirds through the agenda, Siniora raised the proposal, forwarded to him by Murr, to settle retirement claims disputes with two retired generals, Edgard Maalouf (now an MP with Aoun's bloc) and Issam Abu Jamra, both of whom had joined Aoun in his Parisian exile. (Note: it is an illustration of Lebanon's absurd decision making apparatus that a retirement compensation dispute should reach the cabinet. End note.) An expert's committee within the Ministry of Defense recommended a \$60,000 settlement for both combined. Murr proposed that the cabinet accept the committee's recommendation. Siniora refused, arguing that Maalouf and Abu Jamra were not alone. Citing the names of retired Sunni officers with the same demands, Siniora said that he would not approve payments to Abu Jamra and Maalouf until the other cases could be closed as well.

14. (C) Promising that he would accelerate work on the other cases, Murr said that there was no reason to delay payments on those that were ready. Siniora refused to budge. The Christian ministers pulled Siniora aside to note that rejecting the compensation demand would hand Aoun an enormous tool by which to attack the cabinet. Siniora objected and rejected calls to bring the matter to a vote. At this point, Lahoud intervened, saying that, since there was no consensus, the matter should be put aside for now -- a position that made the Christians that much more eager to approve the compensation, since they suspected Lahoud was eager to set a trap: Lahoud, they feared, would use the deferral in order to attack them somehow, by provoking the Aoun camp.

MURR ATTACKS SINIORA'S

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LACK OF TRUST IN HIM

15. (C) According to the accounts we've heard (including from the protagonists), Murr at some point in the debate lost his temper. Jumping from his chair, he shouted at the PM that, if he had questions about this proposal, he should have called Murr in advance to discuss it. But by placing the matter on the cabinet agenda, Siniora had signaled to Murr that he agreed with the proposal. Now, Siniora was intentionally humiliating him, discrediting his proposals. Alternating between shouts and cries, Murr then recounted the previous year of his life: he nearly lost his life in a terrorist attack, he broke with his father politically, he divorced his wife, he became on bad terms with his father-in-law (Lahoud), and so on. All of this happened, Murr said, because he was working his best for Lebanon. Yet Siniora still refuses to accept or trust him. Murr said that he has exiled himself from the March 8 movement (which includes all of his pro-Syrian previous allies), yet Siniora keeps him at arm's length from the March 14 movement. Murr said that Siniora's arrogance turned him into a political orphan. When Murr was undergoing his 14 surgeries after the bombings, others in Lebanon called to wish him the best; Siniora never even asked how he was doing.

CABINET COLLEAGUES PERSUADE
MURR NOT TO QUIT OR TALK TO PRESS

16. (C) Murr then vowed to quit the cabinet, saying that he would tell everything to the press waiting downstairs for a cabinet read-out about the incompetence and stupidity of Siniora. As he turned to storm out, he told Lahoud that he would say everything he knows about Lahoud, politically and personally. Marwan Hamadeh claims to have "jumped on Elias," preventing him from getting into an elevator. Hamadeh and Mouward prodded Murr into a side office, where they were joined by Lahoud. The three of them worked together to

console a sobbing Murr, with even Lahoud telling his former son-in-law that he should not destroy the cabinet.

17. (C) Eventually, with Hamadeh and Mouawad shuttling between Murr and Siniora, and Lahoud rubbing Murr's back with seeming benevolence, a deal was struck: Siniora and Murr apologized to each other and (really) kissed and made up in front of the other ministers; the cabinet passed the compensation package for Aoun's two generals; the cabinet asked Murr to accelerate the work on the compensation disputes for other retired generals; and the ministers and Lahoud -- in a rare instance of political and confessional unity -- agreed not to talk publicly of what happened.

ORCHESTRATING THE APPEARANCE OF HAPPY CABINET COLLEAGUES -----

18. (C) Although the press was not present for the Murr outburst and breakdown, the ministers fretted that the security guards posted outside the rooms, who could have heard the argument, would talk. Thus, Mouawad and Hamadeh convinced Siniora and Murr to join them to stroll arm-in-arm in Beirut's downtown area, stopping at a sidewalk cafe for a light meal and drink. With Lebanon's ubiquitous photographers in the area, the Lebanese papers the next day featured a beaming ministerial quartet, with Siniora and Murr appearing comfortable and happy in each other's company.

19. (C) Murr told the Ambassador that, from his perspective, the issue was "behind us," although he said that he still resented that Siniora has taken so long to trust him. Hamadeh -- like Murr, the survivor of an assassination attempt -- was scathing about Siniora, accusing the PM of being insensitive to the fact that Murr has suffered multiple traumas, physical and emotional, and "deserves our support." Claiming that she had trouble sleeping thinking of the pain he must be in, Mouawad said that she pitied Murr, who acted "as if he was stripping himself naked in front of us." Minister of Justice Charles Rizk, more coldly, accused Murr of being "spoiled, immature." Minister of Economy and Trade Sami Haddad called the whole episode "embarrassing." None of the ministers could explain to us why the normally cautious Siniora, who often demonstrates more elasticity in his positions than many would like, would pick such a trivial issue on which to take a stand. Siniora told us it was all about "equity" with the other claimants.

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ANALYZING LAHOUD'S ROLE -----

110. (C) The Ambassador asked Murr about Lahoud's role in comforting him and convincing him to stay inside the cabinet. Why, the Ambassador asked, wouldn't Lahoud have just watched, knowing that a cabinet collapse works in his favor, since the President must sign any new ministerial appointments? Moreover, it is clear that the Syrians hate Siniora. Why wouldn't Lahoud have relished the embarrassment Murr would have caused for Siniora? Murr dismissed the suggestion that Lahoud played a constructive role for benevolent reasons. Lahoud, Murr said, was simply frightened that, with Murr in the emotional state he was in, he might tell deeply damaging stories about Lahoud to the press. No one in Lebanon, Murr claimed, has more authority in trashing Lahoud than he does.

COMMENT -----

111. (C) Obviously, there was more at play here than simply monetarily insignificant retirement claims (although we agree that Aoun would have gleefully seized upon rejection of the packages in order to attack the cabinet). This fight was in part about the relationship between Siniora and Murr. We

know that bad blood exists between Siniora and Murr: it has taken a long time to warm Siniora up to the idea of Murr visiting Washington, and Murr perceives and resents the lack of trust Siniora has in him. We don't know the background of Siniora's skepticism about Murr, but we suspect it dates back to Siniora's tenure as Finance Minister under Rafiq Hariri. Murr and his mercurial father Michel -- both allied with the Syrians at the time (as the father still is) -- have a billion-dollar business and property empire in Lebanon. As would have been standard practice at the time, they probably demanded special treatment on taxes and the like from a resentful Siniora, who probably knows quite a bit about shady Murr business practices.

¶12. (C) Of course, this fight was also about the mental state of Elias Murr, after his traumatic injuries, political break with his father, divorce with his wife, and separation from all of the pro-Syrian business and political allies he had accumulated in the past. In essence, he has abandoned one political family without being truly accepted into another. It was particularly poignant, as the Ambassador left Murr's house on 5/16, when Murr's bodyguard (who also was badly injured in the assassination attempt) whispered, with an air of desperation, "please come see the Deputy Prime Minister again soon."

¶13. (C) The remarkable part of this story is that it has, with the exception of a few brief references, stayed out of the Lebanese media. This shows incredible discipline and unusual solidarity on behalf of the ministers, as a juicy political-personal scandal like this would normally be tossed around in the press for days. Nayla Mouawad said that the ministers agreed to protect "Elias' dignity" by not going public with what really happened inside the cabinet chamber. If that explains the press silence, we find this a most astonishing -- and uncharacteristic -- example of collective Lebanese kindness, from politicians who are usually more eager to belittle each other (or worse!).

FELTMAN